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ABSTRACT

Novice researchers often face more peril than pleasures in the researching process, which can become even more perilous as bicultural backgrounds locate them in ambiguous and fluid positions in relation to the "native" and the research community. Such ambiguity problematizes the techniques of participant observation, revealing it as a Western ideal with the tacit assumption that a researcher is an individual who is able to study other cultures from a distance while actively participating in them. Few composition researchers have speculated on the idea that participant observation may oversimplify the diversity of those who do ethnography by decontextualizing it. For one novice researcher (brought up in China but a student in the United States) who observed an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) class focused on autobiographical writing, her dual role as an observer and a participant left her uneasy. This ambivalence lasted throughout the whole research process. She realized much later that at root was the conflict between the required participant observation and her cultural sense of self. What researchers need is a more fluid, process-oriented definition of the ethnographer's role based on feminist standpoint theories to acknowledge the complexity of multicultural observers and observed. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Writing In and Writing Out: Some Reflections on the Researcher's Dual Role in Ethnographic Research

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Ruoyi Wu

ED 373 324

In "The Perils, Pleasures, and Process of Ethnographic Writing Research," Wendy Bishop expresses how she feels as an experienced researcher about ethnography, saying that "everything about ethnographic writing research is perilous" as well as "pleasurable" (4). As a novice researcher, I face more perils than pleasures in the researching process which becomes even more perilous as my bicultural background locates me in an ambiguous, and often fluid, position in relation to both the "native" and the research community. Such ambiguity, I think, problematizes the technique of participant observation, revealing it as a Western ideal with the tacit assumption that the researcher is an individual who is able to study other cultures from a distance while actively participating in it. It therefore poses serious questions to researchers with quite different cultural backgrounds. In this presentation, I will first try to articulate some of my theoretical reflections on the researcher's role based on my own research. I will then propose a more fluid definition of such roles by grounding my discussion in feminist "standpoint" theories and in the slippery boundaries of "self–other" relations and of the genres observed by critics of women's autobiography. Of course, what I observe here is limited as well as benefitted by my bicultural perspective as someone who was brought up in China in a certain historical period and who has studied in the U. S. for a long time, and moreover as someone who is only a beginning researcher.

A key issue in ethnographic research is the researcher's relationship with the culture she studies. While discussions in methodology cover both the hierarchical relationship of the researcher from one culture studying another, and "autoethnography" where the researcher studies her own culture (Hayano; Moss), few of us in composition studies have speculated on the possibility that the idea of participant observation may oversimplify the diversity of those who do ethnography by decontextualizing them. Thus, the required roles may not help to fully prepare novice ethnographers for the multiple realities and cross–cultural differences they

CS214441

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encounter among the natives, caused frequently by what researchers themselves bring to the site. This ideal role is best explained by Geertz. In his famous article "'Native's Point of View'," Geertz borrows two related concepts—"experience-near" and "experience-distant"—from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut to show that we can know natives even though we are not part of their group. "The real question," Geertz says,

> ...is what roles the two sorts of concepts play in anthropological analysis. Or, more exactly, how, in each case, ought one to deploy them so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer. (57)

This balance between the two perspectives—being a witch and a geometer while writing about witchcraft—had been my ideal in approaching research, so had the standard that a good ethnographic study is "theoretically driven."

Once I started my actual research though, I recognized many possible shades of differences and unclear areas between a witch and a geometer. No clearly defined role was available for someone like me standing between cultures. I was supposed to do two opposite things: to get involved while remain detached. And detachment could be further reinforced by the required "theoretical drivenness," resulting in more ambivalence to multicultural researchers, for analytical categories need to be based on the research community's epistemology. Although I was far from a feminist at first, cherishing instead grand totalizing theories and neutral methodology as magic keys to our understanding of different writers, my constant struggle with the various theories that might "contain" ESL subjects like myself gradually aligned me with some theories of women's autobiography. That is, I spent a lot of time searching for a smaller "mismatch" between my data and theory. The major questions I asked before going to the field were framed not only by my readings in Western rhetoric but by my Chinese values. I wanted to examine ESL writers' self-presentation as reflected in the American writing class. For one thing, the heated debate between expressivism and social constructionism with their tendency to dichotomize self and society and personal and academic discourse did not seem relevant to me.

As a Chinese, I had never felt one was more significant than the other, and in writing the two became one. More important, as the ESL writing research community was limited by its dominant linguistic paradigm, few cross–cultural studies had been done in either the self or autobiography. Even the major pedagogical goals for them were different. In short, ESL writers were excluded from other studies due to their cultural and linguistic differences. All these "intercategorical" gaps did not make sense to me, so I intended to explore various connections between the self and culture among ESL writers in the context of a writing class. I would use what I called the "cultural self" as an explanatory construct, but I could define it only in negative terms: it was not a metaphysical entity in philosophy (Descartes), nor an inner voice (Elbow), nor an illusion of intertextuality (Derrida), nor even an identity in role negotiation (Brooke), for all these accounts derive, directly or indirectly, from the Western notion of the self as an individual apart from society. What I did not question though was my sheer confidence in myself as a researcher who could investigate other selves with her deep–rooted culture–specific values.

Last fall, I observed one ESL class focused on autobiographical writing, conducted case studies of several students in the class, interviewed the instructor, read all the student writing—from rough drafts to final papers—and, of course, took a lot of field notes. During the whole process, I felt uneasy about my dual role as an observer and participant. On the first day, I asked the teacher, a colleague of mine, if she could introduce me to the class because I didn't think I "should" do it, being there neither as the teacher nor as a student. Within one week, a Korean student asked me whether she could borrow my notes, for she could not always follow the instructor. I felt I was so selfish when I told her that I couldn't help her because this was "my" research, not just class notes. When it was time to ask the class to sign the "Informed Consent"—legal forms required by my university's Human Subjects Committee, I was paralyzed. With its suspicious legal language, the form itself might alienate those I was studying and would break any trust they had in me. I was assured, however, that the form was the only way to protect them, and accordingly, me from any legal suit. But far from being convinced, I

again had to ask the instructor to explain to the class why they had to sign the form. As a result, one of the most interesting "subjects" refused to sign, saying what I would have done in his place, "You can use my writing, but why do I have to sign that form?"

All these examples required me to draw a clearer line between myself and others than I liked. I did not want to emphasize my researcher identity so much as to interrupt the flow of the class, or to be so selfish as to keep my notes to myself, or treat others in contractual terms which might imply a lack of interpersonal responsibilities and trust. To me personally, forms were threatening, for during the Cultural Revolution I had to fill many that would stamp me as a member of certain "marked" groups. I was sure that some of those students might have had similar feelings. This ambivalence lasted throughout the whole process of research. What I wanted most, I realize now, was an unobtrusiveness achieved both from my effort not to interfere with the class and from my desire to feel as part of them. In other words, though I consciously intended to "go native," I simply did not want to wedge myself into the class as neither a student nor a teacher. I was afraid that if I participated too actively, the students might not benefit because the class would be spent on my interests; I might also lead some in the class to say things similar to what I assumed so that the intricacies of the group would be lost; but if I didn't play an active role, I might also run the risk of not getting various subtle cultural differences I intended to seek. I "naturally" followed my instinct in being a "quieter" presence to be accepted.

To find out the reasons for how I felt, I read some literature about researchers' roles, "reflexivity," and "confessional tales" (Van Maanen), yet it seemed to be based on the model of the researcher as an individual who was able to separate herself from the culture she observed, and who was different from the latter too. For example, some theorists use Augustine, Rousseau, and Montaigne—all "classical" autobiographers with a strong belief in individualism—to show thinking as a self–reflexive activity. To Rousseau, this reflexive ability is defined as "regard[ing] oneself as an other and to be aware of oneself as his instrument of observation" (Babcock 3). Others warn us against the four extremes of "data–centered, thin description; subjects–centered groupthink; research community–centered groupthink; or

researcher–centered solipsism" (Cross 118). To clearly distinguish all of these was hard for me, bicultural as I was. Besides, I could not visualize myself playing multiple roles like putting on different garments as Goffman describes everybody does, nor could I oppose the instructor to the students as a representative of the institution, as some master narratives in composition studies have done. I believed, and I still do, that only conscientious teachers can be generous enough to be examined as "lab rats" under our "scientific" magnifying lens. It would seem hypocritical for me to ask somebody for help and then to "observe" her teaching. As I have an obligation to both my subjects and the instructor, the major ethical question for me, therefore, is not probing into others' "private" lives—for anything presented in writing is already socially significant in my mind—but trying not to be "selfish" when dealing with the people who were helping me. The ESL students, the instructor, and I myself were all constitutive of one classroom culture. Even theorizing and categorizing writers like me as "others" was not natural to me. With such a double consciousness, I questioned my own assumptions of culture and self, and about applying "Western" theories to my ESL subjects. In particular, I questioned how my fluidity—or ambiguity—could have affected my findings of their self–presentations.

At root, as I realized much later, is the conflict between the required participant observation and my cultural sense of self. Paradoxically, even though I had been studying this topic from the very beginning, subconsciously I clung to the hope that I could play the role of a researcher who could simultaneously involve in and detach from others' lives. My upbringing on one hand does not allow me to see myself as apart from people like me (there was quite a few Chinese and Asian students in the class), a sense of self far different from the one implicated in the dual role. The two concepts are not easily translatable, as LuMing Mao points out, for there is "a symbiotic relationship between the individual and his or her community" among the Chinese (16). For us, as Lawrence D. Kincaid writes: the part and whole "ultimately cannot be separated. One way to say this is that there is no part and whole but rather one part/whole. Each 'one' defines the other, and indeed is the other" (9 emphasis original). As the individual is not opposed to the community, "to subdue oneself...is part of the process of self–cultivation and

self–actualization" (Mao 20). This social ideal of subdued self is ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical. Its counterpart of importance in this culture, I think, would be the authentic self Peter Elbow advocates. Neither concept is realistic, but each has rhetorical power over members of a culture. When I was growing up, this social ideal was smoothly blended into the teachings of the Communist Party. This holistic Chinese identity was reinforced by the our long–time resistance to Western influences. It became so much of me that I have to remind myself all the time how bicultural my thinking is—which is not "good" to my generation with our Cultural Revolution mentality—equally influenced by American rhetorical theories as by my Chinese worldview.

On the other hand, the ethnographer's dual role is not as obviously questionable as many methods in more hard–nosed social sciences, but to simultaneously play the two roles, as Geertz tells us, "is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin" (58). Everywhere we see examples of great disparities between the native and observers. When we listen carefully to the following instruction in David M. Fetterman's textbook Ethnography: Step by Step, we may overhear things:

> A fire is a key event that compels the ethnographer to observe, analyze, and act simultaneously. A participant observer has contradictory obligations. The ideal stance is simply to observe and record what happens in such a situation, but as a participant the researcher has an ethical obligation to help put out the fire. These obligations need not be mutually exclusive, however. Typically, the ethnographer simply joins in at the appropriate level depending on the danger, the amount of experience in the field with a certain group, and behavioral norms in that situation. (94)

In trying to listen with an insider's ear, what I hear is a lack of concern for the group under study. In sharp contrast to the fast–paced happening during an emergency for the natives (experience–near), the deliberation of a scientist seems slow and level–headed, so emotionally distant. Other than being bound by the obligations as a participant, the researcher is depicted as detached from the native's tragedy. If this imagined researcher watches a fire among her own people, I wonder, does she ever have time to consider the pros and cons before she acts? The anthropologist Barbara Tedlock sharply pinpoints:

> What seems to lie behind the belief that "going native" poses a serious danger to the fieldworker is the logical construction of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, between scientist and native, and between Self and Other, as an unbridgeable opposition. The implication is that a subject's way of knowing is incompatible with the scientist's way of knowing and that the domain of objectivity is the sole property of the outsider. (71)

This division and hierarchical relation between the observer and observed can explain why Fetterman can present the above example so calmly as a scientist. As the two perspectives are opposed, naturally, as Beverly Moss says, insiders are more "vulnerable to value conflicts because they are unable to maintain a safe emotional distance from the communities they research" (163). The implication is that the farther away you are emotionally from what you study, the better off you are in avoiding "bad" science, though the emic perspective is essential in cross–cultural understanding. I would think that neither an insider, nor an outsider, nor a bicultural observer can separate her feelings from thinking. In my own case, as a person who practices witchcraft, to borrow Geertz's words again, how can I write about it without revealing my inclination as a witch? How can I "appropriate" an outsider's unbiased lens while my own location in the world is at stake? This demand was far beyond my ability.

I wonder how ethnographers with more of an etic perspective can avoid such vulnerability by being exempt from their own cultural baggage of values? How can they separate their subjective experiences from objective ones? We know some anthropologists from the West went native and never came back to their own society (Tedlock 70). I wonder if their imaginative universe converged with the others', or if the two were so divergent that they had to give up their outsider status to go native. Maybe it was a combination of their rich imagination and dire reality. They became native—or at least grew closer to them—while playing the dual roles. The other extreme was the well–known anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who shocked his field when his unprofessional diary revealed that he had used rude language to describe the natives (Geertz 56). According to Geertz, this is an epistemological issue more than a moral one, since "Malinowski's voice from the grave merely dramatizes it as a human dilemma over and above a professional one" (56). Although in composition studies such cases are rare

due to the less exotic cultures writing researchers study, these anthropologists' lives do tell us that it is hard to distinguish the two roles and to separate the emotional from the scientific. As all research has some impact on the life and identity of the human researcher and vice versa, my own study has enlightened me with respect to my deepest sense of self. As if meeting unforgettable people at some crossroads in life, I found my autobiography woven together with those of my subjects.

No wonder the 1970s witnessed a shift in anthropology from participant observation to the observation of participation, as Tedlock tells us. In the former, ethnographers try to get involved and detached; and in the latter, ethnographers' and others' "coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter" is observed and described (69). Now, "both the Self and Other are presented together within a single narrative ethnography, focused on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue" (69).

What we need, I believe, is a more fluid, process–oriented definition of the ethnographer's roles based on feminist standpoint theories in order to acknowledge the complexity of multicultural observers and observed. Such a construct should include ideologies and should complicate self–other relations in research. Rather than the standard participant observation or observation of participation, researchers should have a continuum of—or a variety of roles—to play, from active involvement, more or less participation, to detached observation, the extent of which is decided by both the situation of natives and the researchers' shifting alliances with different ideologies. I don't think these positions encourage us to be solipsist. Instead, they can help our research to be more objective with a clear ideological dimension. As Donna Haraway claims in her article "Situated Knowledge," "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (190). Since no position can be innocent, politics and science are intertwined. We need a view from "somewhere" instead of "nowhere," so we should take into account the historical specificity of our own cultural subtexts, the unspeakable hidden life that may disrupt the effect of what Geertz calls the rhetoric of being there. Whether it's an

anthropologist who goes to an exotic culture, or a composition researcher who studies a more familiar culture, the clarity of the line between self and others and between experience–near and experience–distant depends on the people involved. All of us, however, have the obligations to both the research community and the native in showing where we stand ideologically, because as the autobiography critic Janice Morgan says, we must ask "Who is speaking? Who is writing?" (4). One reason is that many crucial issues in autobiography "take on a compelling 'other' dimension if one looks specifically, as we do, into the case of women writers" (6). If the researcher, like many women autobiographers, has a different sense of self because of early socialization, this "other dimension" should be discussed openly. Treated as "locations of uncertainty" (Nussbaum xix) among conflicting ideologies, these other dimensions can sensitize us to more cross–cultural differences, whether the culture under study is similar or different from ours. We will then have sufficient space for discussing the dynamics of multiculturalness—or various ethno forces—in research so as to enhance our understanding of meaning making in ethnographic studies. This act implies blurring the boundaries between ethnographic and other kinds of cultural writing like autobiography, biography, and literary criticism. Actually, ethnography is not just about others, nor is autobiography about the self. In both genres, we write about "us" and "them" within the complex context of multicultural lived experiences.

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